Saddam: The Hero That Crumpled

After High Expectations, Many in Arab World Feel He Let Them Down

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AMMAN, Jordan, Feb. 27—Whether Iraqi President Saddam Hussein goes down in history as a war criminal or a war hero, Arab glorification of his defiance of the West has, for many, turned to disillusionment that will mark the regional memory for centuries.

When the Iraqi leader projected the dreams of dispossessed Arabs by boldly scolding the West for its double standards on the Arab-Israeli conflict, he drew their applause. But when he suddenly had to salvage Iraq and its army, his myth crumbled.

After Saddam's star and his credibility skyrocketed in Arab eyes as those of the valiant warrior fighting the world with powerful weapons, his sudden pragmatic about-face has left his audience dumbfounded.

Some Jordanians and Palestinians cried in their homes today—grown women and men who could not comprehend or handle the letdown of an image of strength collapsing before their eyes.

"There are those who are struck and those who are sad. Where is the Mother of Battles?" asked Abdullah Toukan, an adviser to King Hussein and secretary general of Jordan's Higher Council for Science and Technology. "They were clinging onto something like a myth, a higher expectation. He is a war hero, a symbol. It is not that he failed them. He was double-crossed, in their eyes, and conspired against."

"I felt disappointed, like all Arabs," said Samir Motaweh, a former press adviser to Hussein and public relations manager for Royal Jordanian Airlines. "I was given to believe that he was capable of holding on—and if not, then he should have allowed diplomacy to play its role a long time ago."

Regardless of how the man in the street, the nuclear physicist, the politician or the historian tries to rationalize the retreat of Saddam from Kuwait, the touching but painful scenes of Iraqi prisoners of war surrendering to American and Saudi soldiers in the desert, kissing the hands of their captors, will not be forgotten.

An Arab doctor said she broke down and cried when she watched on television as one Iraqi prisoner knelt forlornly in the sand with a look of wild expectation in his eyes and another kissed a Saudi soldier "just for being left alive."

Most analysts here say they believe that Saddam, regardless of the balance sheet of his achievements, has earned himself a place in history for redefining inter-Arab relationships and standing up to 30 countries for 40 days.

Some Arab analysts disagree, however, predicting that in the long run, Saddam will be harshly judged.

"He entered the annals of history, fine—but from which door, and under what category, is a different matter. For some people it is not enough to be just remembered as part of history, but how," a critic said. "He dominated the scene for six months and carried two keys, one for war and one for peace. Now they have both been knocked out of his hand."

Opinions here vary on how long Saddam can survive the military pressure and economic blockade that to many observers are clearly aimed at dislodging him from power.

"If he survives, he will not be as influential as he was prior to Aug. 1. In the region, his influence will be diminished, but he is not politically dead," a political scientist said.

Even if Saddam has staying power with his own population, some doubt he can outlast the determination of the United States and its allies to have him replaced.

"I think Iraq can survive without the United States, but can it survive without everybody?" asked Zaki Ayyoubi, a businessman and a member of Jordan's Council on Foreign Relations. "I would not think that the direct threat is from within. The threat is from the determination of the United States . . . to have him toppled."

Meanwhile, many Arabs who once worshiped Saddam are trying hard now to find excuses for him, or shreds of evidence that his power has somehow been preserved.

"Has he failed us? Yes, in terms of what he has been telling the Arabs—that they can stand up to the universe—and then out of the blue saying: 'I'm withdrawing,' " explained Motaweh.

"Even according to the Americans, he was the fourth military power in the world, so why should we not believe him when he was not only capable of taking things to the brink but putting up a good defiant show? The masses are upset because they always expect more than the leaders can deliver, particularly in the Arab world," he added.

Along these lines, the favorite theory in Amman today—one that is also coming out of the mouth of Jordanian Prime Minister Mudar Badran—is that Saddam, the shrewd tactician, had secretly pulled out his elite Republican Guard from Kuwait two weeks ago.

This is why there was so little resistance, a prominent Jordanian argued passionately: "He burned the oil wells as a smokescreen to cover his pullout. His troops are intact."

There seems to be unanimity among Saddam's camp in the Arab world that he became a target because he was the only leader in the region to build a credible deterrent to Israel's military strength.

"He is the only one who could tell the Israelis: 'If you hit us, we will hit you back,' " a Jordanian scholar said, adding that while the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser "spoke of rockets he never had, Saddam fired off the rockets he did have."

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Jordanian students protest at the U.N. office in Amman against the allied offensive in Iraq.

"I think by the massive military action against Iraq, the bombing campaigns and now the occupation of a chunk of Iraqi territory, the United States has guaranteed a historical niche for Saddam Hussein, regardless of whether he is dead or alive," said Ayyoubi. "Through the dynamic of this conflict and the issues he has raised, Saddam has interjected into Arab politics elements that have always been there but that cannot be removed."

Several analysts said that the continuation of the conflict even after Iraq agreed to pull out of Kuwait and conditionally accepted U.N. Security Council resolutions, was seen as degrading to Saddam and a "humiliation extending to millions of Iraqi people, Arabs and millions of Muslims."

"Bush's actions are perceived in this part of the world as . . . belittling and disgracing to Arabs and Muslims, even if they are not meant to be. This will complicate and make very difficult the task of political reconstruction," Ayyoubi said.

Saddam, in Motaweh's view, will be remembered as the man who redefined the outlook and role of Arabs to their future and to one another.

"There will be a kind of renaissance, a new thinking now," he said. "Before, it was all a matter of hidden agendas, outward courtesies and well-concealed hatred. Even if Saddam is blown off tomorrow, he is the one who brought out the true feelings" of those Arabs who opposed him in the war.